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ABSTRACT

In response to the current intensified public interest in education, some professional organizations have undertaken to draft public policy responses. These responses are constrained by a variety of issues. When practitioner task forces analyze policy under time constraints, they face issues in policy definition, and the definition used affects the information sources selected. Task forces are also affected by issues of representativeness, personal agendas, and group dynamics. Under time constraints, access to a fully representative array of stakeholders and data is diminished. Finally, the format and depth of policy analysis reports is determined by conceptions of audience needs. Because practitioner audiences work in an environment of information overload, the consequent summarization and simplification of reporting may distort the authors' intent. (Author/TE)

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN POLICY ANALYSIS

ISSUES IN THE ANALYSIS OF POLICY BY PRACTITIONERS

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Prologue

Once upon a time there was a girl named Little Red Riding Hood. She lived with her mother and father in a small village called Alexandria. Her parents wanted her to visit her relatives in the village of New York. So Little Red Riding Hood put on her little red coat and prepared to go. Her mother gave her a basket to take to her relatives. In it was a packet of procedures. The procedures were fresh out of the oven and smelled warm and inviting. When Little Red Riding Hood peeked inside the packet, she saw all kinds of goodies - interviews, document analyses, and group process and time for dessert. Her father warned her to watch out for wolves and kissed her goodbye.

Little Red Riding Hood set off for New York. The trail was dark and scary. She had to go into the foreboding National Airport forest and find the shuttle path marked D23. Then she had to take the path through a deep fog all the way to Kennedy meadow. But being a brave little girl, she did. And she reached New York safely. When she got there she went to her relatives' house. Her grandparents and aunts and uncles were there - but where were great-grandpa and the children?

Her grandparents and aunts and uncles all buzzed eagerly around the basket and Little Red Riding Hood soon forgot great-grandpa and the children. Grandma and grandpa pulled out the packet of procedures. Everybody crowded around, sniffing and poking to find the ones they liked best. Some were too hot, some were too cold, but some were just right! They threw away the ones they didn't like.

Then grandpa and grandma fed the procedures to the aunts and uncles. Most ate them right up! The finicky eaters who wouldn't were sent to bed without their supper. After supper Little Red Riding Hood and her grandpa and grandma sat around the fire and had the group process and time for dessert. Then Little Red Riding Hood noticed there wasn't a single procedural crumb left for great-grandpa or the children! Little Red Riding Hood began to cry when she saw this, but her grandparents said, "Don't cry, Little Red Riding Hood. We ate enough for great-grandpa and the children. They don't need to eat at all!" This made Little Red Riding Hood feel much better. So she picked up her basket and started home.

The woods were even darker, scarier and foggier on the way home. Little Red Riding Hood began to get nervous and look over her shoulder. While looking backwards, BOOM! she ran into a big wolf holding a stake. The wolf said, "I am very hungry, Little Red Riding Hood. What do you have in your basket?" Now Little Red Riding Hood knew she didn't have any procedures, group process, or time left so she apologized profusely. But it didn't do any good - the wolf ate her right up!

Introduction

This is a true adaptation of a fairy tale. It loosely describes one policy analysis experience I have had while working with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. I will be referring to it as I discuss issues raised in conducting policy analysis with practitioners.

Like many other professional associations, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has been pressed to take a more active stance on education policy. Our membership wanted assistance in analyzing current issues. They felt overwhelmed with the plethora of reform reports and legislative mandates.

So ASCD established a goal of intensifying the quality and quantity of our public policy response to issues affecting curriculum and instruction. This goal represented a departure from our historic neutrality, brought about by a diverse membership of administrators, teachers, and higher education faculty. To accomplish this goal we turned to other organizations engaged in policy analysis. We reviewed work by groups such as the Education Commission of the States and the Rand Corporation.

ASCD searched for ways to use its organizational characteristics as a basis for a policy analysis process. Specifically, ASCD is an organization that represents all professional roles in education. We have 56 affiliates, one in every state and several overseas. These characteristics of role inclusiveness and organization in state units fit the current policy scene. That is, the education policy initiative now rests with the states. Policy is being developed by alliances of traditional policymakers with new public and private

actors. These characteristics led us to conduct policy analysis primarily at the state level, using task forces of state ASCD members who cut across role groups.

We conducted two policy analyses in 1983 and are now embarking on a third. We examined the consequences of increasing high school graduation requirements in Florida and of raising promotion standards in New York City. We are now just beginning a study of the probable impact of differentiated pay systems on curriculum and instruction. In each case we have developed a charge, formed a task force of ASCD members and content experts with an appointed chair, and brought the task force together. They were given an introduction to policy and its analysis and potential questions to be answered. They set their procedures and discussed data collection. Later they met a second time to write a report for ASCD dissemination. My purpose today is to discuss issues raised within the context of this approach to policy analysis. They include issues of definition, participation, time, and access.

Defining Policy and Participation

The staff's views of policy analysis, and what we were about, started to emerge as we began our discussions with influential ASCD members and education policy experts. Our purpose was stated as "expressing positions on educational issues to ASCD members and the public." With such a purpose, policy analysis becomes a vehicle for expressing positions rather than an end in itself. Despite the apparent simplicity of this purpose, I did not fully understand its implications. I found myself frustrated by the lack of time, interest, and money necessary to do a thorough analysis. Despite the emphasis on expressing positions, I held to my view of policy analysis as a research-like activity, albeit naturalistic rather than scientific.

Our definitions of policy and policy analysis came to us from consultants who viewed educational policy as "efforts external to school systems to influence school systems." Of Guba's eight different definitions of policy (Appendix A), our definition implicitly combined the first two: policy as intents or goals and policy as standing decisions that serve to influence. Our stated definition of policy as "efforts external to school systems to influence school systems" worked well in our first effort in Florida where we were examining proposed statewide legislation. However, when our second task force began policy analysis in New York, we neglected Guba's first conception of policy; by not interviewing those stakeholders who were the intenders, such as the Chancellor of the New York City Public Schools or the Board members who adopted the policy, we did not give enough attention to the historical context. By defining policy as standing decisions or as problem solving strategy (Guba's definitions 2 and 4), we may have lost sight of policy as intended or as experienced by its clients: children and their parents.

In selecting task force members we ran into another set of problems. We attempted to make our task forces representative of those educators who would be affected by the policy and who made up our constituency. For ASCD that meant including administrators, teachers, and higher education personnel. It did not mean including parents or children. ASCD views itself as "for" children, and therefore we worked on the assumption that we fairly represented their interests.

As in all such endeavors task force members brought their own preconceptions to bear:

- their view of the policy analysis process
- their preconceptions of the policy's consequences
- their anticipation of personal benefit.

Preconceptions of policy consequences sometimes proved troublesome. In New York, a fiercely political town, all resident task force members already held a position on the policy in question. They did not always agree with one another, and sometimes their collective views collided with those of other significant, but unrepresented, stakeholders.

Views of personal benefit also varied. Some task force members sought the collegial opportunity to examine the policy. They wanted to learn and think through the issue. Others saw participation as a chance to publicize preconceived views, or even to achieve notoriety.

Tide and Time

In a voluntary membership association such as ASCD, roles and responsibilities are especially fluid. ASCD members are at least tacitly aware of the

organization's norms for participation: contribution of both weekday and weekend time, lengthy discussion, valuing of balance, multiple or submerged authorship, and advisory status. However, awareness and acceptance of these norms varies among members based on their ASCD history, job affiliation, and personal values, such as the importance of collegiality or status.

These variations contributed to differentials in the amount and power of input - and output. With task forces made up of single and generally informal representatives of stakeholding groups, individual variations had large effects. This was especially true where some members held positions traditionally subordinate to others, i.e., teachers to superintendents. In addition, the views of task force chairs were particularly influential as they held final writing authority.

These factors were complicated by time limits. While most research and evaluation is time-bound, policy analysis conducted for the purpose of expressing positions on current issues is especially sensitive to what's "hot." As ASCD staff member Harriet Bernstein says, policy is always in the air, but certain actors and circumstances give ideas permission to rise to the surface. In a political arena, issues may rise and sink in a matter of days. They sometimes rise again - and come back to haunt you. This characteristic of currency leads to analyses that are both superficial and harnessed to personal agendas. The result is a snapshot, a single look from a particular angle. In our case it provides something of a collage: one picture made up of individual pieces pasted in by a group. Some collages are full of meaning and present a concept. Others seem random and obscure.

Tight time limits lead to making do with what is at hand. Sometimes the

resources at hand are bountiful. In Florida, we had a majority of the relevant documents, a representative task force, and thoughtful individuals whose backgrounds had prepared them to address the issue. Other times resources are insufficient. In New York we lacked relevant documents including published accounts, access to some stakeholders, and a representative task force. The task force was made up of thoughtful individuals but did not represent all of the groups who affected or were affected by the policy.

Time constraints also forced the group to focus on content issues, temporarily concealing personal concerns. As sometimes happens, submerged issues, the personal concerns, the preconceptions, eventually floated to the surface when they were no longer held down. A more leisurely time frame would have allowed an early airing of these issues. This might have ameliorated later problems in achieving consensus when writing the report.

Access

Access to stakeholders and the information they possess is critical in policy analysis. This self-evident precept is sometimes difficult to put into practice. Under time constraints we turn to people we know. Whether Washington, D.C. and the organizations that inhabit it are viewed as closed (an old boys' club) or open (an expansive network), we call our contacts, especially when we are in a hurry. This results in people becoming spokes-persons for a constituency who may never have heard of them. One person is often asked to represent a large and diverse group, i.e., teachers or principals. Unless they have been selected by those for whom they allegedly speak, they are more likely to represent themselves.

Secondly, choice of a policy definition tends to define who you think the stakeholders are. This is complicated by which stakeholders you have access to. Policy intenders and policy experiencers are often the most difficult to contact in a bureaucratic environment.

Finally, information serves political agendas. The timing and nature of its release affects its impact. This is true both in data collection and in dissemination of reports. In one of our studies we did not have access to data that the policy promoters subsequently used to rebut our findings. While they had legitimate reasons to maintain security of the data until they could complete their own analysis, our work looked incomplete by comparison.

The format of our reports raises a final issue. Most of our readers and the education press do not read our full reports. As we compress them, first into summary reports and then into news releases, they lose some of their flavor and fullness. They tend to become brittle and sharp and are subject to overstatement. The sense of thoughtful consideration is sometimes lost.

Summary

Under the bright light of public interest in education, some professional organizations have reacted by making public policy responses. These responses are constrained by a variety of issues. When practitioner task forces analyze policy under time constraints they face issues in policy definition. The definition used affects the information sources selected. Task forces are also affected by issues of representativeness, personal agendas, and group dynamics. Under time constraints access to a fully representative array of stakeholders and data is diminished. Finally, the format and depth of policy analysis reports is determined by conceptions of audience needs. Practitioner audiences work in an environment of information overload. This leads to summarization and simplification of reporting that may distort the authors' intent.

Epilogue

Of course, as in all fairy tales, Little Red Riding Hood lived to see another day. After her bruises healed, her parents asked her to visit some other relatives, the Meritpays. This time Little Red Riding Hood is taking a bigger and better stocked basket and is calling ahead to make sure everyone is home before she leaves! She likes adventure, she likes her relatives, and she's eager to set off to see the world once again.

APPENDIX A

Definitions of Policy to be Included*

Eight different definitions of policy will be considered; the definitions are simply listed below, and some additional comments will be made thereafter:

1. Policy is an assertion of intents or goals.

2. Policy is a governing body's "standing decisions" by which it regulates, controls, promotes, services, and otherwise influences matters within its sphere of authority.

3. Policy is a guide to discretionary action.

4. Policy is a strategy undertaken to solve or ameliorate some problem.

5. Policy is sanctioned behavior, formally through authoritative decisions, or informally through expectations and acceptance, established over ("sanctified by") time.

6. Policy is a norm of conduct, characterized by consistency and regularity, in some substantive action area.

7. Policy is the output of the policy-making system: the cumulative effect of all the actions, decisions, and behaviors of the millions of people who work in bureaucracies. It occurs, takes place, and is made at every point in the policy cycle, from agenda-setting to policy impact. As such, policy is an analytic category.

8. Policy is the impact of the policy-making and policy-implementing system as it is experienced by the client.

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* Guba, E.G. "The Impact of Various Definitions of 'Policy' On the Nature and Outcomes of Policy Analysis," a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, 1983.